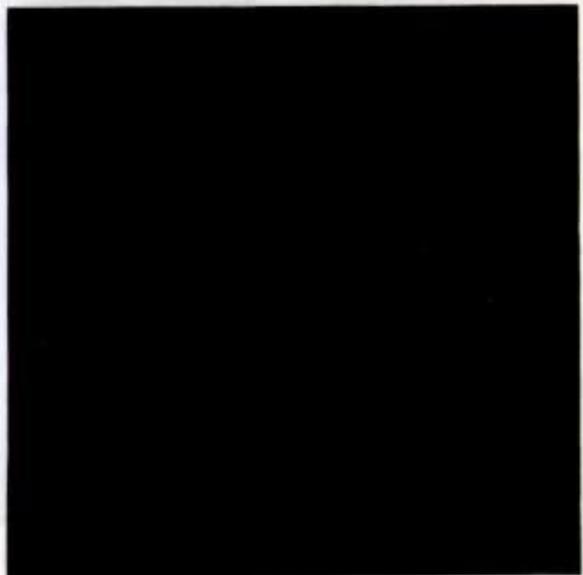


The Russian constructivists and anarchism



A short account of the Russian constructivists and their close relations with anarchism

London is currently host to an exhibition of the works of Rodchenko, Russian artist associated with the Constructivist movement. The exhibition reveals Rodchenko's relationship with the Bolshevik regime but fails to dive beneath the surface of official Soviet truth and the origins and ideas of the Constructivists.

The leading theorist of Constructivism was Alexei Gan who published his book Constructivism in 1922. The book is noted for its innovative typographical design. Gan makes no bones about being rooted in Marxist theory and refers throughout to "the proletariat with its sound Marxist materialism". This does not stop his savage attacks on the ideas of the Bolshevik Party's cultural commissions, the Commissariat of Popular education (Narkompros). He accuses Narkompros as being hardly distinguishable from non-Communists in their veneration for old concepts of art: "Their words promise the future whilst they reverently transmit and popularise the past". This more Communist than thou stance is more easily understandably if we dig a little deeper and realize that the groundings of Gan's ideas lie, not with Bolshevism, but with anarchism.

Gan had become a leading light in the Moscow avant-garde in the 1920s. This avant-garde had radical views on art and architecture. Before the First World War there was very little in Russian architecture that could be called innovative as compared with what came after.

After the February Revolution a Trade Union of Architects had formed. By the time of the end of the civil war and the introduction by Lenin of the New Economic Policy, this had collapsed and the old establishment Moscow Architectural Society (MAO) was refounded and set itself up in its old building. Shchusev became its President. Whilst well meaning in its outlook, it failed to break with the professionalism of the past.

Mansion occupations

In 1917, with the flight of many politicians and functionaries of the old regime, both Bolsheviks and anarchists occupied their large mansions and began using them as headquarters. Anarchism was

particularly strong in Moscow with a following among the industrial working class. In fact, most estimates of their numbers point to them being three times as numerous as Bolshevik Party membership.

Anarchists began publishing papers and Moscow saw the appearance in September 1917 of a “weekly public affairs and literary newspaper of the anarchist persuasion” called Anarkhiia (Anarchy).

With the revolutionary events of October Anarkhiia ceased publication for a short period only to re-appear as a daily and arguing strongly against the concessions that the Bolsheviks had given with their signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty. It pledged to paralyse the governmental mechanism, seeing the socialist State as much an enemy as its capitalist predecessor. The second issue of this daily contained a piece by Gan on “The revolution and popular theatre”.

By the fifteenth issue there was a regular section on the back page devoted to culture and headed Tvorchestvo, meaning ‘creative work’. This covered literature, theatre and art and was edited by Gan. Anarkhiia had a daily print run of 20,000 and was able to widely broadcast the ideas of avant-garde painters and artists. Among those who wrote for it were artists associated with constructivism-Rodchenko, Tatlin, Altman, and Punin whilst Malevich was to be the most regular contributor.

The 6th April issue had an important article by Malevich ‘Architecture as a slap in the face to reinforced concrete’. He called for a reincarnation of Moscow architecture that would ‘allow the young body to flex its muscles’. It attacked architecture of that present period as ‘the only art with the warts of the past still growing endlessly on its face’ and the ‘sick, naïve imaginations’ and ‘lack of talent and poverty of creative powers of the ‘individualist architects’. He criticized the new structure of the Kazan station whose architect was Shchusev, the President of MAO.

The anarchists expropriated 25 Moscow mansions and set up local HQs there. The Merchants’ Club became the main HQ of the Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups and the address for Anarkhiia. The daily described the occupied buildings and their contents. The Merchants’ Club became the House of Anarchy. It ran an intensive cultural programme which included ‘circles of proletarian art-printing, poetry and theatre’. Gan himself was superintendent of a take-over of one of the largest mansions, the house owned by the multi-millionaire Morozov. Gan described its contents in Anarkhiia and later on came the announcement that the mansion would be turned into a museum with Gan as chief curator.

Rodchenko, Tatlin and Malevich’s connections with the anarchist movement are obscure. Later memoirs by Rodchenko are obviously cagey on his connections with the movement, either through his own caution or family editing. On the other hand the articles that these artists wrote for Anarkhiia are imbued with anarchist ideas and Catherine Cooke (see below) has suggested that Malevich’s great work Black Square may be alluding to the anarchist black flag.

Bolshevik propaganda

In March and early April 1918 the Bolsheviks began a propaganda campaign against the anarchists in Moscow, affrighted by opposition to the Brest -Litovsk treaty, and the growing support for anarchism. Anarkhiia countered these accusations, which blamed anarchists for every act of vandalism or disorder in Moscow. Trotsky then began a week-long series of talks to Red Guard troops at the Kremlin, where he viciously attacked anarchism and whipped the soldiers into an anti-anarchist fury. These troops, under the control of the Bolshevik secret police corps, the Cheka, then launched an early morning attack on the anarchist houses on 12th April, involving an artillery bombardment. Forty anarchists were left dead or wounded, and five hundred were arrested and kept in ‘abominable conditions and treated in the most insulting manner’, according to an editor of the other Moscow anarchist paper Golos Truda, who was among those arrested. We do not know if Gan was among those arrested. Anarkhiia was temporarily shut down.

In the following years as the Bolsheviks tightened their grip on power, those artists like Gan and Malevich who had aligned themselves with anarchism had to adopt a public posture of support for the regime and were accommodated as semi-official or official spokespersons for the regime on cultural matters. Gan later perished in a prison camp in 1940. The Soviet regime buried this lost history, which is only now being re-discovered.

This article is based on the following article: Sources of a radical mission in the early Soviet profession. Alexei Gan and the Moscow Anarchists, by Catherine Cooke, published in Architecture and revolution : contemporary perspectives on Central and Eastern Europe, Routledge, 1999.

From Organise! the magazine of the Anarchist Federation , issue 70, summer 2008 . Available at :

http://flag.blackened.net/af/org/issue70/russian_constructivists_anarchism.html